

The exceptionally well written and printed programme book for this production makes a point of emphasising the amazing difference between Belisario and Lucia di Lammermoor, the opera which it succeeded. Frankly the contrast could scarcely be greater; there is no real love interest and there are no really romantic situations in Belisario, the theme is heroism betrayed, with the strong man of Byzantium brought down by the intrigues of his spiteful wife and her Centurian lover under the apparently helpless noses of the Emperor Justinian, of Irene - Belisario's steadfast daughter, and under that of a freed captive 'Alamiro' who somehow or other turns out to be a long lost son (by whose negligence it is not at all clear). The plot creaks ominously almost throughout - Cammarano's early effort at operatic versification cannot be compared either in quality or content with that of Lucia, arguably his most persuasive libretto, yet Belisario is a work of almost pure magic. The memorable depth and the haunting melodies of Donizetti's Scottish masterpiece have been replaced by an extended lyricism which somehow survives the bloody conspiracies of the story; the static situations which present themselves in each scene are melted by music of endless variety and charm. Belisario indeed offers a different musical perspective from that of Lucia in that each of the full scale arie is simple in form and structure yet there is a series of ever-more sophisticated concertati which bring successive acts to a towering conclusion. The production at the Theater Zuidplein ingeniously made the stage seem larger and deeper each time the curtains rolled back, the costumes (it is probable, I think, that Roman armour and modern masculine feet and legs are the biggest obstacle to an operatic straightface) were beautifully made and designed and after the first scene of Act 1 had the advantage of sympathetic lighting to meld them together. The chorus was well grouped and intelligently deployed throughout the opera and its (amateur) ranks made a lively and warmly enthusiastic contribution to each scene, never intruding and always managing to make their necessarily limited numbers fill the stage when required, either as citizens, soldiers, slaves or senators as the teeming plot

demands. Of the two performances I saw there is no doubt whatsoever that the second was the best, with first-night nerves behind them (in fact miraculously banished) each of the team of soloists (all professional) acquitted themselves admirably. Vocally the roles were well-delineated, Antonina's venom and her final unbelieving despair

'Ah! toglietemi la vita

che la morta e un ben per me'

was pin-pointed movingly by Margot Stroink, her Act 3 cabaletta, precise, accurate yet full of passion was embellished by beautiful cadenze. The seconda donna (who in this opera is nothing of the kind) Irene, was sung by Thea Vermeulen, sustaining an extremely long role with an affecting youthfulness and succeeding in making the father/daughter duo the true focus of the score. In this, as throughout, Jan Polak brought his pleasing baritone to bear, this was a large scale performance, from his first entry his outstanding acting was both touching and suitably virile. Of the spate of smaller roles (some sung very creditably by chorus members) the Eutropio of Ad van Baasbank was first-rate, vivid recitativo maintaining the perfect representation of the scheming lover. Alamiro - the tardy son - was sung by the enviable tenor of Wouter Goedhart who would be the pride of even the largest opera house, he has only to overcome the problems of an excessive portamento and a too wayward stance to be the white hope of tenorial dramaturgy in the Netherlands. Since Oberto, Conte di San Bonifacio last year the Rotterdamse Opera has come on in leaps and bounds, Belisario was a distinguished musical whole and expertly paced by Hans Wamelink who together with Arnold Alons has succeeded in putting Rotterdam, operatically speaking, on the map. If Maria di Rudenz materialises next year, there will be an even larger contingent of Donizettians present from all over Europe to urge it to further peaks.

Alexander Weatherson

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